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ABSTRACT

Building upon the work of the Effective Early Learning (EEL) Project in raising the quality of early learning for young children in the United Kingdom, the 3-year Accounting Early for Life Long Learning Project (AcE Project) focuses on enhancing in 3- to 6-year-olds those attitudes and dispositions that are important to life-long learning. This report presents the rationale for the project, and describes its conceptual framework and methodology. The three key research components of the project are to: (1) define the early characteristics of life long learners, focusing on "Advancement Attributes," attitudes, dispositions, and inclinations; (2) design assessment instruments to measure these characteristics; and (3) develop practice to support them. The conceptual focus is on child outcome domains such as academic achievement, dispositions to learn, respect for self and others, well-being, and on adult outcome domains such as sensitivity, stimulation, and autonomy. A variety of methods will be used in the study, including consultation and literature review, multiple case studies, measurement scale development, and action research. Phase 1 of the project will entail the description and design of key concepts and instruments, and will include in-depth case studies of 20 children from 10 early childhood settings. Phase 2 will involve development and evaluation of concepts and instruments in action research conducted in 30 early childhood settings. Phase 3 will include dissemination and analysis of the materials and knowledge base, and development of a national training and professional development program. (Contains 40 references.) (KB)

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ED 437 177

THE AcE PROJECT

Accounting Early for Life Long Learning

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Introduction

Professor Christine Pascal, Dr Tony Bertram and team members, based at the Centre for Research in Early Childhood at University College Worcester, are beginning a new and exciting Project entitled 'Accounting Early for Life Long Learning' or the AcE Project.

The Project builds upon the work of the Effective Early Learning Project. However, its focus lies in the crucially important area of what are long term and effective educational outcomes in early learning. It is an area that needs some urgent work, given the current push for Baseline Assessment and value added measures in early childhood. It is also an area that is increasingly being referred to by policy makers, the business community and parents as they accept the evidence which shows that life long learning is shaped early. There is consensus in recent research that the important outcomes in early learning in the long term are attitudes, dispositions and inclinations. Yet, there has been virtually no developmental work or research in this country on what they might look like in practice, how they might be nurtured effectively, or how practitioners and providers might assess them in their work. These goals are at the heart of this Project.

The focus of this new Project is innovative in that it combines research and development in a major national initiative, but the methodological approach has been well tested in the Effective Early Learning Project. The approach was immensely successful in impacting nationally to raise the quality of early learning for significant numbers of young children in the UK. We believe that working in partnership with practitioners, parents and children is the key to development. It is also invaluable in ensuring that the research is relevant, credible and in touch with the real world in which young children are growing up. This is critically important in a dissemination process which aims to reach many different audiences.

The AcE Project is presented in three phases. Each phase is self standing and has clear objectives and outcomes. However, taken together, the three phases build on from each other into a coherent and comprehensive strategy for large scale and national improvements in young children's learning experiences. Our initial contacts with politicians, policy makers, providers, parents and practitioners have indicated a great deal of interest and enthusiasm for the work put forward in this Project.

This suggests that the AcE Project is touching an important area of need.

Rationale to the Project

A number of national reports and Government documents (National Commission, 1993; Ball, 1994, DfEE, 1997) during the 90's have indicated the importance of early learning to life long achievement. Drawing on current research from across the world, they have also argued, convincingly, that the most important learning in the early years has to do with aspiration, socialisation, self esteem, motivation and confidence. These enabling attitudes have been called the 'super skills' of learning (Ball, 1994). The evidence shows that these aspects of early learning are essential for successful and long term progress and achievement.

We have never known so much about young children's learning. Research from a variety of disciplines, is providing us with rich and powerful evidence about how children learn, the nature of such learning, and the ways in which early experiences shape the pattern of progress, achievement and fulfilment, throughout an individual's life. The research highlights the importance of, for example, dispositions to learning (Katz, 1995); mastery orientation, (Dweck, 1992); pro social development, (Scaps et al, 1991); conflict resolution, (Lantieri,1990); multiple intelligences, (Gardner, 1989); involvement, linkedness and emotional well being, (Laevers, 1989). As Sir Christopher Ball pointed out in the influential Start Right Report (1994),

"Modern educational research is on the threshold of a revolution. The findings of brain science, for example, or the theory of multiple intelligence, or the idea of different styles of learning, or the recognition that people can learn to learn faster, are all pointing the way towards a new and powerful theory of learning which will be able to satisfy the three tests of explanation, prediction and aspiration. Central to the new theory will be a clearer understanding of learning development, and the sequence whereby people progress from infancy to become mature learners. In the (recent) past the professionalism of teachers has often been thought to reside in mastering the subject or discipline. But these are merely the tokens of learning. The art of

learning (learning how to learn) is also concerned with the types, or 'super skills' and attitudes, of learning - of which motivation, socialisation and confidence are the most important. These are the fruits of successful early learning."

Ball (1994) para.2.17

The AcE Project grows out of these exciting and innovative ideas about the role of early experiences in life long learning. The Project acknowledges that some early childhood providers and practitioners might find some of these developments challenging. Yet, it is essential that we succeed in incorporating these ideas into early years practice if we are to create the society of life long learners that will be needed for the future (Ball, 1994; Handy, 1994; Abbott, 1994). This Project aims to address these issues directly and to bring this evidence within the grasp of all those who work with young children. We have a clear intention to improve the quality of early years practice and develop practitioners through the translation of these ideas into accessible and meaningful strategies for early childhood practice. We are also very aware that we have to build upon the developments that are occurring at present in early years provision. These include the Desirable Outcomes Framework (DfEE, 1996), the Nursery Inspection Schedule (DfEE, 1996), and the developing Baseline Assessment Schemes (DfEE, 1997).

Against this background, the title of the Project, 'Accounting Early for Life Long Learning', (AcE Project) was chosen very carefully. The word 'accounting' in the title of this Project has three meanings. Firstly, 'accounting' can be interpreted in terms associated with 'explanation' and 'causation'. What are the characteristics in young children (3- 6 years) which account for them becoming life long learners? The second meaning of 'accounting' is located in terms associated with 'numerical audit'. Can we design quantitative measures for those characteristics which describe young children who develop a sustainable desire for learning? The third meaning of 'accounting' is given in terms of providing a statement of 'responsibilities' and 'conduct'. Can we outline what practitioners need to do to improve the effectiveness of young children's early learning? Thus the title neatly encapsulates the three key research issues of this Project: (1) defining the early characteristics of life long learners, (2) designing assessment instruments to measure them and (3) developing practice to support them.

Recent Government policy has focused upon putting into place outcome measures in early childhood education, as a means of quality control and quality improvement. At present, these are focused mainly on the acquisition of skills and knowledge in academic areas, as, for example, detailed in the 'Desirable Outcomes' (DfEE, 1996) for nursery aged children. Along with this has been a concern to develop measurements of children's performance in respect of the delineated outcomes. This has led to a burgeoning of interest in baseline assessment (Tymms, 1996; Wolfendale, 1993). LEA's now have such schemes in place, but they appear to be focusing mainly on language and mathematics. Recent DfEE requirements for baseline assessment schemes (DfEE, 1997) have meant personal and social development are now being included, but very few schemes have any reference to attitudes, dispositions or emotional well being. We feel that this is a major omission and one which this Project aims to address. The AcE Project recognises the importance of academic achievement, but aims to build on these cognitively focused outcomes, by enhancing practitioners' ability to support and assess other areas of children's achievement, which are also important to long term success. These will include dispositions to learning; respect for self and others; and emotional well being.

Further, in its development work with practitioners, the Project will acknowledge the recent neuro-psychological research on brain growth in infants (summarised in Phillips, 1995; and Trevarthen, 1996) which supports the view that environments for young children which are staffed by caring, responsive and dependable adults are critical in the development of these attributes and dispositions in children. The proposed Project will aim to develop the ability of practitioners to support the child's learning in sensitive, stimulating and empowering ways (Bertram, 1996). To sustain development in young minds, practitioners must be prepared to look at wider outcomes than academic knowledge and skills, and include dispositions to learn, respect for self and others, and emotional well being, in their aspirations and intentions for young children. Developing practitioners' awareness of these important aspects of children's learning, and providing them with the means to enhance and assess them, will be a central element of the Project.

A report by the influential US. National Centre for Clinical Infant Programs (Brazelton, 1992) suggests that academic success rests predominantly on child's early knowledge of how to learn, as well as what is learned. Goleman (1996) claims,

'that school success is not predicted by a child's fund of facts or a precocious ability to read so much as by emotional and social measures; being self assured and interested; knowing what kind of behaviour is expected and how to rein in impulse to misbehave; being able to wait, to follow directions, and to turn to adults and peers for help; expressing needs whilst getting along with other children'. (p193)

The AcE Project is targeted at three to six year olds because there is evidence to show that this is the critically important phase for establishing learning attitudes. Gender and race studies (Siraj-Blatchford, 1996) show that life long attitudes are set early, and attitudes to 'self as a learner' follow the same pattern. Goleman (1996) talks of a 'window of opportunity' analogous to Lorenz's (1970) notion of 'imprinting'. These studies show that there is a biologically determined period when it is crucial to establish certain semi-permanent attitudes about learning. The stronger these are embedded, the greater their resilience to inevitable, climatic periods of poor stimulation, and the more likely that they will persist. The importance of this early period of social consciousness to life long achievement is recognised by Donaldson et al (1983),

Early childhood is '... a period of momentous significance for all people growing up in our culture.... By the time this period is over, children will have formed conceptions of themselves as social beings, as thinkers, and as language users, and they will have reached certain important decisions about their own abilities and their own worth.'

Donaldson, M et al (1983), p.1.

We live in an audited society where that which is measurable is seen as significant. We need to ensure that what we are measuring is significant and that we are not simply focusing on those things which are easily measured. The identification, development and measurement of young children's aptitudes, dispositions and inclinations are to be the subject of this study. They are part of the intrinsic motivation which sustains a child's learning and, when strongly established, are carried forward to develop life long learning. We shall call these attitudes, dispositions and inclinations 'Advancement Attributes'. The 'Accounting Early for Life Long Learning' Project will offer a professionally focused research and development process, which:

1. identifies and describes 'Advancement Attributes' in young children,
2. devises a means of measuring them, and
3. puts in place a national strategy for enhancing them.

These key areas formulate the Projects aims:

Project Aims

- To identify, develop and assess 'Advancement Attributes' in young children which are associated with life long learning.

- To improve the early childhood educators' ability to create life long learners.

Project Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of the AcE Project develops from the conceptualisation of quality in early childhood settings which framed the Effective Early Learning Project. The EEL Project postulated three sets of variables in evaluating 'quality' in early childhood settings; context, process and outcome variables.

The Context variables describe the environmental characteristics of the setting. The EEL Project defined the context variables as a list of 'Ten Dimensions of Quality', containing characteristics very similar to those outlined in the Rumbold Report (DES, 1990), the RSA Report (Ball, 1994) and in the OFSTED inspection framework (DfEE, 1996). These include aims and objectives; learning experiences; learning and teaching strategies; planning, assessment and record keeping; staffing; physical environment; relationships and interactions; equal opportunities; parental partnership, home and community liaison; management, monitoring and evaluation.

The Process variables are generally taken by educational researchers (Kryiacou, 1994) to be the interactive processes, within the context of the setting, which facilitate learning. In the EEL Project these were observed and measured by two instruments; the Child Involvement Scale (Laevers, 1994) and the Adult Engagement Scale (Bertram, 1996).

The Outcome variables describe the results of the educational process. These would include attainments for the child and attainments for the practitioners. The EEL Project focused particularly on context and process variables in its aim to improve the quality and effectiveness of early learning. The AcE Project will focus on the outcome variables.

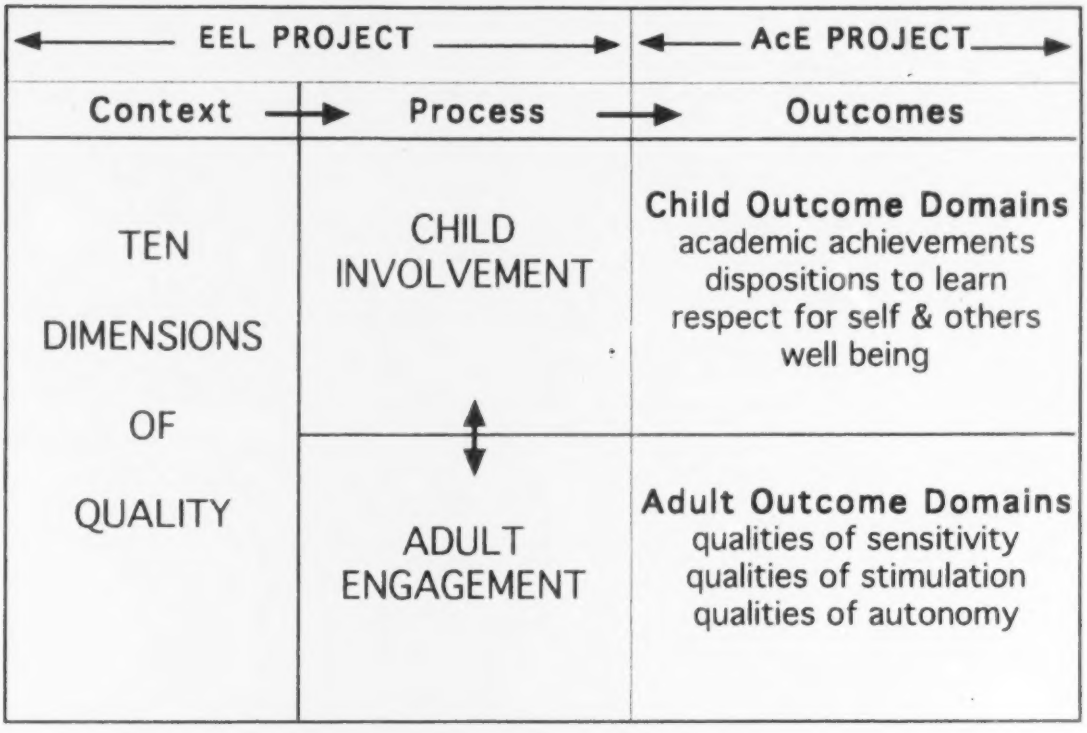

FIGURE 1: The Context - Process - Outcome Variables in Effective Early Learning

The outcome variables may be viewed in two parts; those associated with the child and those associated with the adult. Each has a number of domains around which a cluster of 'Advancement Attributes' may be identified.

Child Outcome Domains

The outcomes of effective early learning can be seen in children's (1) academic achievements, (2) in their dispositions to learn, (3) in their respect for themselves and others, and (4) in their well being. These 4 outcome domains offer a framework for analysis but are clearly not discrete and separate. Each of these domains will have a cluster of

'Advancement Attributes', which children, who have potential to be successful learners, will display.

Adult Outcome Domains

It is important that the outcomes of the educational process are seen to impact upon staff as well as children, both elements are required to develop if quality is to be improved. The outcomes for the adults in effective early learning settings can be seen in the development of the three educative qualities of 'Engagement' (Bertram, 1996). Each of these adult outcome domains will have a cluster of attributes associated with them.

(1) Sensitivity to children; This outcome domain is based in the adult's enjoyment of children and their families, in their celebration of difference, in their genuineness, empathy and in their balanced responsiveness.

(2) Stimulation; The second outcome domain has an interactive quality which centres on the ability of the adult to intellectually challenge children. It is associated with the adult's training, awareness and knowledge; and their capacity to be observant, analytical and reflective. Stimulation must be appropriate, relevant and meaningful to the child.

(3) Autonomy; The third outcome domain is associated with providing the children with a measure of autonomy in their actions and interactions. Adults who show they have the ability to create responsibility and autonomy in children display certain characteristics, which arise from their feelings of their professional self worth. Adult early childhood practitioners who feel valued are more likely to be empowered, informed and articulate. Research indicates that practitioners with these qualities are, in turn, more able to educate and empower their children and more capable of offering children responsibility, choice and autonomy.

The central aim of this study is to enable adults involved in early childhood settings, both practitioners and parents, to consciously establish

measurable patterns of behaviour, both their own and their children's, which are conducive to life long learning.

Project Methodology

The AcE Project is practice focused. The intention is to set in motion a research and development strategy which will have direct relevance to practice, and practitioners, and specifically, result in improvements of the quality of early learning experienced by 3 - 6 year olds.

The research approach adopted reflects this and so the AcE Project may be termed 'Real World Research' (Robson, 1993). The Project will be carried out primarily in the real world of early childhood settings, working collaboratively, and in partnership, with practitioners, parents and children. The Project Team has had extensive experience of implementing this approach through the Effective Early Learning Project (Pascal, Bertram et al 1996, 1997), which demonstrated its effectiveness in impacting on practice nationally. The approach also ensures that the research and development work undertaken is relevant, meaningful and accessible to those involved in providing for young children. This means that the AcE Project is much more likely to have an impact on the real world of practitioners and children, a central aim of this study.

The AcE Project may be located in the qualitative paradigm, although it incorporates some quantitative methods in the development and research process, and in particular, in the assessment of children. It should be emphasised, however, that this will be primarily a qualitative Project, utilising mostly qualitative research methods. The intention is to provide a rigorous, detailed and rich evidential base for the development of early childhood practice. The collaborative, practitioner and practice focused approach is entirely in line with this overall aim. The adoption of Case Study and Action Research as the core elements of the methodology reflect the priority given to the linkage of research and practice. Experience has shown (Meade & Cubey, 1995; Blenkin et al 1996; Pascal & Bertram, 1997) that these approaches are very effective and practicable in the exploration and improvement of quality in educational practice. They provide a powerful means of ensuring that the research is grounded in the realities of practice, that practitioners have ownership of the results, and that any outcomes are transferable and manageable to other contexts.

They have also been shown to be capable of providing rigorous, reliable and valid evidence, which adds detail and richness to the knowledge base generated by more quantitatively focused research projects (Robson, 1993; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Bryman, 1995).

The qualitative methods adopted in the Project will facilitate the development of clear, detailed and practical descriptions of 'Advancement Attributes' in young children, and allow the documentation of effective educative practices by the adults who work with them, over an extended period of time. They will also generate rigorous, systematic evidence of the learning process in action and allow an analysis of those aspects which appear to be associated with enhanced attainment in young children. The expertise and capabilities of the Project Team in analysing the mass of qualitative data generated from multiple case studies and action research, using computer programmes (NUD.IST and SPSS), has been demonstrated in the EEL Project (Pascal, Bertram & Ramsden, 1997). The EEL Project pioneered a research analysis strategy to handle the wealth of qualitative data that such research methods generate. This strategy will transfer directly to the data handling procedures required for the AcE Project.

The added inclusion of a strategy to develop and utilise a set of quantitative Measurement Scales in the research design is consistent with the 'real world' approach proposed in this Project. Practitioners in early childhood are now operating in a professional context in which measurement, baseline assessment and value added strategies are dominant features (Wolfendale, 1993; Fisher, 1995; Tymms, 1996). We believe that early years professionals have to respond pro actively to the demands placed upon them for quantitative evidence, and to use this opportunity to promote what they believe counts in early learning. National assessment requirements have been shown to shape and direct educational practice (Blenkin, 1995), and as these requirements are now being developed for younger children (DfEE, 1997), it is important that they are informed by the knowledge base we have about what constitutes effective and long term early learning. The development of measurement procedures in the key domains of young children's learning is currently a priority for practitioners and providers. The recent requirement for local authorities to submit schemes for Baseline Assessment (DfEE, 1997) for approval has added impetus to the urgency of this work. It is imperative that such schemes reflect the broader development of the child and

include the assessment of attitudes, inclinations and dispositions, along with the more academically focused areas of development, such as language, literacy and mathematics.

The intention in this Project is not to develop a set of psychometric scales of children's ability. To do so would be cumbersome, and of limited professional application. Rather, we intend to extend the work already begun within the EEL Project (Pascal & Bertram, 1996), working in conjunction with the EXE Project in Belgium (Laevers, 1996), in developing assessment scales to help practitioners measure children's involvement and emotional well being. Building on this experience, the Project Team has already carried out some early developmental work on the creation of measurement scales for attitudes and dispositions, and we hope to extend this work further through this Project. The approach adopted by the Project Team is very much in line with the strategy currently being adopted in local authorities for the development of their Baseline Assessment Schemes. We will dovetail into this work through close collaboration with a number of authorities who have been leading developments in this area (e.g. Birmingham LEA, Bristol LEA, Nottingham LEA, Worcestershire LEA). Links with these authorities have been established through the EEL Project and they are keen to continue the liaison with the Project Team. Key requirements of such assessment schemes are that:

1. they can be easily used by practitioners,
2. they will support them in their regular assessment of children's progress,
3. they are capable of being used as a baseline in value added measurements.

We accept the pragmatic need for this and agree with Tymms (1996) that it is possible to develop assessments which are capable of meeting each of these requirements.

The approach to developing assessment scales adopted by the Project Team, the EXE Project and the local authorities, is very similar. In most cases, the aim is to develop observation-based assessments of children's learning in different domains, using a rating scale, e.g. for literacy, numeracy, dispositions to learn, emotional well being. Judgments of children's capability in each domain are made by teachers/ practitioners

on the basis of clear descriptions of various levels of competence. These descriptions have generally been developed by small working groups of practitioners, local authority officers and/or researchers. Using their professional expertise and experience, they have defined the domain of learning to be assessed, e.g. language, mathematics, personal and social education, delineated a range of competence for each domain, and graded these competencies along a 3, 5, or 7 point scale.

As Tymms (1996) points out, the Baseline Assessment Scales developed in this way appear to provide accurate and valid data on children's performance, particularly if they have a moderation system built in. The experience of the EEL and EXE Projects in the use of similarly developed assessment scales would concur with this (Laevers, 1994; Pascal et al, 1997). There is also a relatively simple procedure to enhance the reliability of scales developed in this way even further. This involves inviting practitioners to assess a sample group of children using the scales, and then asking another group of practitioners to do so. A check is then made of the extent to which the 1st and 2nd assessments agree with each other. Naturally, the 2nd assessment should be carried out by practitioners who are unaware of the results of the 1st assessment.

This approach to the creation of Measurement Scales for 'Advancement Attributes' will be closely followed in this Project with the clear intention of impacting on the development of assessment policy nationally and locally.

In summary, over the three planned phases of work the Project will use a range of research methodology to fulfil its objectives. These include:

- Consultation and Literature Review
- Multiple Case Studies
- Measurement Scales
- Action Research

Research design

The AcE Project has a three phase research design.

Phase 1 can be characterised as a period of Description and Design, during which the key concepts and instruments to be used within the Project are described in depth and designed. This phase of the Project is 'exploratory' and so the research activity will be focused on a Consultation

process and a carefully selected series of rigorous, in-depth Case Studies of 20 children, their parents and practitioners, from 10 diverse early childhood settings. This evidence will provide the foundation knowledge on 'Advancement Attributes', and the Measurement Scales, which will be used during the subsequent phases.

Phase 2 can be characterised as a period of Development and Assessment, during which the Phase 1 concepts and instruments are further developed and evaluated in practice through the initiation of an Action Research process in 30 early childhood settings, working with 90 practitioners and 900+ children and their parents. Evidence on the viability of the development process and Assessment Scales, and the impact of the AcE Development process on adults and children, will be gathered.

Phase 3 can be characterised as a period of Dissemination and Analysis, during which the materials and knowledge base generated during Phases 1 and 2 will be disseminated widely, using the established networks and strategies of the EEL Project. A national Training and Professional Development Programme will be carried out, a programme of regional and local conferences will take place and a series of training materials and publications will be produced. Also, the final analysis of the impact of the AcE Development process on adults and children will be published. It is intended that this dissemination programme will reach a minimum of 900 practitioners and 300 early childhood settings, catering for 9,000+ children.

Project Structure

The Project has a 3 phase structure.

Phase 1: Description and Design

January 1999 - December 1999

In the first phase the key concepts and instruments to be used within the Project are described in depth and designed. The aim is to:

- gain a detailed description of 'Advancement Attributes' in young children

- design Assessment Scales to measure 'Advancement Attributes' in young children

- design a Development Programme to enhance practitioners' skills in supporting 'Advancement Attributes' in young children.

The outcomes of this phase will be to provide:

- A taxonomy of 'Advancement Attributes' associated with the outcomes of effective early learning.

- Detailed definitions and descriptions of 'Advancement Attributes' in young children's activity.

- Assessment Scales to measure the development of 'Advancement Attributes' in young children's learning.

- A Development Programme for practitioners in early childhood settings which is designed to enhance 'Advancement Attributes' in young children.

Phase 2: Development and Assessment

January 2000 - December 2000

In the second phase the Phase 1 concepts and instruments are further developed and evaluated in practice. The aim is to:

- trial and evaluate the AcE Development Programme to enhance the long term learning of young children,

- trial the Assessment Scales for 'Advancement Attributes'.

The outcomes of this phase will be to provide:

- guidance on effective educative practice in enhancing 'Advancement Attributes' in young children.

- training materials and an accredited training course for developing the educative skills of early childhood practitioners.

- reliable and valid assessment scales for measuring 'Advancement Attributes' in young children, and guidelines on their use.

- a data base of evidence on the impact of enhancing 'Advancement Attributes' on the practice of adult educators and the achievement of young children.

Phase 3: Dissemination and Analysis

January 2001 - December 2001

In the third phase the materials and knowledge base generated during Phases 1 and 2 will be disseminated nationally. The aim is to:

- disseminate the AcE Project materials, AcE Development Programme and AcE knowledge base.

- analyse the impact of the AcE Development Programme on young children and the adults who work with them.

The outcomes of this phase will be to provide:

- a national strategy for the dissemination of the AcE Development Programme for enhancing the quality of young children's learning;

- a national programme of accredited training for early childhood practitioners from a wide range of education and care settings;

- liaison with national and local early childhood providers who are developing Baseline Assessment Schemes;

- publications and presentations on the impact of enhancing 'Advancement Attributes' in young children and the link to life long learning.

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